

U.S. Gets In Deeper: Study Excerpts Through Diem Coup In '63

Following is an edited version of some of the Pentagon papers, as made public in Washington by Senator Mike Gravel (D., Alaska) and transmitted by the Associated Press. Technical difficulties in preparing the material have delayed transmission of the sections dealing with the period following 1963.

American Intelligence Criticized Diem In 50's

Much of what the United States knows now about the origins of the insurgency in South Vietnam rests on information it has acquired since 1963, approximately the span of time that an extensive and effective American intelligence apparatus had been functioning in Vietnam.

Before then, our intelligence was drawn from a significantly more narrow and less reliable range of sources, chiefly Vietnamese, and could not have supported analysis in depth of insurgent organization and intentions.

None the less, U.S. intelligence estimates through 1960 correctly and consistently estimated that the threat to GVN internal security was greater than the danger from overt invasion.

Throughout the years, they [intelligence estimates] were critical of [President Ngo Dinh] Diem, consistently expressing skepticism that he could deal successfully with his internal political problems. These same estimates miscalculated the numerical and political strength of the Viet Cong, misjudged the extent of rural disaffection, and over-rated the military capabilities of the GVN. But as strategic intelligence they were remarkably sound.

Measure Of Risk

Indeed, given the generally bleak appraisals of Diem's prospects, they who made U.S. policy could only have done so by assuming a significant measure of risk.

Within a matter of weeks [in the spring of 1955], however, the U.S. firmly and finally committed itself to unstinting support of Ngo Dinh Diem, accepted his refusal to comply with the political settlement of Geneva and acceded to withdrawal of French military power and political influence from South Vietnam.

The 1959 NIE again expressed serious reservations about Diem's leadership and flatly stated that:

The prospect of stability in South Vietnam hangs heavily upon President Diem and his ability to

maintain firm control of the Army and police. The regime's efforts to assure internal security and its belief that an authoritarian government is necessary to handle the country's problems will result in a continued repression of potential opposition elements.

This policy of repression will inhibit the growth of popularity of the regime and we believe that dissatisfaction will grow, particularly among those who are politically conscious.

Despite these reservations, U.S. policy remained staunchly and fairly uncritical behind Diem through 1959.

While classified policy papers through 1959 thus dealt with risks, public statements of U.S. officials did not refer to the jeopardy.

To the contrary, the picture presented to the public and Congress by Ambassador Durbrow, General Williams, and other administration spokesmen was of continuing progress, virtually miraculous improvement, year in and year out.

Diem was depicted as a strong and capable leader, firmly in command of his own house, leading his people into modern nationhood at a remarkable pace.

More Soldiers Arrive

In June, 1960, additional U.S. Army Special Forces arrived in Vietnam, and during the summer a number of Ranger battalions, with the express mission of counter-guerilla operation, were activated.

The CIP [Submitted in January, 1961] incorporated one major point of difference between the Embassy and MAAG. General McGarr [William's successor] desired to increase the South Vietnamese force level by some 20,000 troops, while Ambassador Durbrow maintained reservations concerning the necessity or the wisdom of additional forces.

The ambassador's position rested on the premise that Diem wanted the force-level increase, and that the United States should not provide funds for that purpose until Diem was patently prepared to take those unpalatable political measures the ambassador had proposed aimed at liberalizing the GVN. The ambassador held out little hope that either the political or even military portions of the CIP could be successfully accomplished without some such leverage.

Washington Divergence

In the staff reviews of the CIP in Washington, the divergence between State and Defense noted above came about. The staff in the Defense Department considered the VC

Abbreviations Guide

ARVN—Army of the Republic of Vietnam (the South Vietnamese Army).

CIP — Counter-insurgency program.

DOD—Department of Defense.

GVN—Government of (South) Vietnam.

JCS—the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff.

JGS—The South Vietnamese Joint General Staff.

MAAG—Military Assistance Advisory Group (the U.S. military mission in South Vietnam).

NIE—National (U.S.) intelligence estimate.

NSAM—National security action memorandum.

RVNAF—Republic of (South) Vietnam armed forces.

SVN—South Vietnam.

VC—Viet Cong.

threat as most important, and who therefore regarded military measures against this threat as most urgent, advocated approval and any other measures which would induce Diem's acceptance of the CIP, and his co-operation with MAAG. They were impatient with Ambassador Durbrow's proposed "pressure tactics" since they saw in them the possibility of GVN delay on vital military matters, and the prospect of little profit other than minor concessions from Diem in political areas they deemed peripheral or trivial in countering the VC.

Tipping the scales toward what might be called the [Diem-advisors group-Pentagon] priorities was the coincident and increasing need to "reassure" Diem of U.S. support for the GVN and for him personally. This requirement to reassure Diem was plainly at cross purpose with the use of pressure tactics.

Ten days after President Kennedy came to office, he authored a \$41 million increase in aid for Vietnam.

Kennedy Commitment And Programs, 1961

When Kennedy took office, the prospect of an eventual crisis in Vietnam had been widely recognized in the government, although nothing much had yet been done about it.

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ardous road that I am not willing to travel at least without congressional guidance and direction.

Beyond the narrow legal issues involved, Justice Stewart, in his concurring opinion, addressed himself to the larger question of the role of a free press in a free society, and the people's right to know. Justice Stewart noted that under our system of government, the Executive enjoys enormous power in the areas of national defense and international relations, that this power has necessarily grown in this, the nuclear age, and that it is "largely unchecked by the legislative and judicial branches." In one of the most poignant and profound paragraphs of his opinion, Justice Stewart continues:

In the absence of the governmental checks and balances present in other areas of our national life, the only effective restraint upon executive policy and power in the areas of national defense and international affairs may lie in an enlightened citizenry—in an informed and critical public opinion which alone can here protect the values of democratic government. For this reason, it is perhaps here that a press that is alert, aware, and free most vitally serves the basic purpose of the First Amendment. For without an informed and free press there cannot be an enlightened people.

Justice Stewart goes on to say that confidentiality and secrecy are essential to the successful conduct of international diplomacy and the maintenance of an effective national defense, but that the responsibility for this must be where the power is—with the Executive. In his words:

The executive must have the largely unshared duty to determine and preserve the degree of internal security necessary to exercise that power successfully.

To quote Justice Stewart further:

It is an awesome responsibility, requiring judgment and wisdom of a high order. I should suppose that moral, political and practical considerations would dictate that a very first principle of that wisdom would be an insistence upon avoiding secrecy for its own sake. For when everything is classified, then nothing is classified, and the system becomes one to be disregarded by the cynical or the careless, and to be manipulated by those intent on self-protection or self-promotion. I should suppose, in short, that the hallmark of a truly effective internal security system would be the maximum possible disclosure, recognizing that secrecy can best be preserved only when credibility is truly maintained.

Mr. Speaker, I think Justice Stewart has put his finger on what is truly at issue in this whole controversy over the publication of the Pentagon papers. There is a tendency in government to overclassify and to keep from the people, and the people's representatives, information which is essential to the proper functioning of a democratic system. When there is secrecy for the sake of secrecy, or for self-protection or self-promotion, then credibility is seriously undermined and the real security of that system is strained to its very limits. We must recognize and proceed on the assumption advanced by Justice Stewart that an enlightened citizenry—an informed and critical public opinion—is vital to the protection of democratic values.

VIETNAM TESTIMONY

HON. PARREN J. MITCHELL
OF MARYLAND
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Thursday, July 1, 1971

Mr. MITCHELL. Mr. Speaker, there is an abundance of speculation currently over the effect that the publication of the Pentagon papers will have upon the future course of American policy in Vietnam. Many of these assessments have foreseen action by the Nixon administration to speed up its troop withdrawal timetable. It is imperative that all our troops be removed immediately and unilaterally from this illegal and immoral conflict—not on the basis of the whims and calculations of political advisers whose only concern is the public standing of the administration in November of 1972, but because of this war's devastating effect upon the unmet needs of the American and Vietnamese peoples.

Yesterday, I had the privilege of submitting a statement on the war in Indochina before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. I thank Mr. GALLAGHER, the distinguished chairman of the subcommittee, for the opportunity to express my views on this issue, and include at this point my testimony before the subcommittee:

STATEMENT BY CONGRESSMAN PARREN J. MITCHELL BEFORE THE HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE, JUNE 30, 1971

It is reason for encouragement as well as dismay that so many Members of Congress are testifying on the war in Indochina before the Asian and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. This is a heartening event in that it demonstrates yet again the overwhelming opposition to this senseless conflict on the part of both this Nation's citizenry and their elected representatives in this Congress.

At the same time we must be discouraged by the futility of such an outpouring of opinion against the destruction and violence here and in Indochina which has consumed the lives of thousands of Asians and Americans. It is an expression of disgust that has been largely ignored by those who are capable of putting an end to this military folly and who have compounded their error by seeking to prevent the American people from learning the true nature of the decisions which have resulted in this horrid course of events.

Beyond the nature of the disclosures concerning the executive branch decisions that have led us to the situation that we face today, the controversy surrounding the publication of the Pentagon study on Vietnam demonstrates that many Americans have lost their faith in the Government which purportedly represents them and that the Government is fearful of letting the people know what it has done in the past is still doing today. It is our responsibility to restore the faith of the American people in our Government.

We cannot speak piously of a system of laws and then blithely disregard those limitations upon excessive governmental authority when it suits us. We cannot expect our young citizens to keep their actions within the law if we fail to do so ourselves.

Those who argue that the revelations in the Pentagon papers should come as no surprise to the American people are correct. We have long been aware of the Government's

misleading of the public in the inflated body counts which included dead animals as well as the enemy. The pride taken in the week's "kill" also demonstrates the coldness and indifference towards the destruction we are inflicting in Indochina, which has come to characterize and to plague the American psyche.

The Pentagon papers have also revealed that the CIA told the present administration in 1969 that the domino theory was not applicable to the situation in Indochina. Yet the president still speaks of a Communist threat to the stability of the entire subcontinent. If the President should change his line of argument in defense of our continued support of the discredited Thieu-Ky regime, that will not be anything new either. We have already heard far too many different justifications for our support of various regimes and for our involvement in the war. As each of these arguments has been successively knocked down, a new one has sprung up in its place.

Neither is the executive branch's disregard of the first amendment and its protections against prior restraint of the press a recent outgrowth of this military folly. Soldiers, congressmen, and ordinary citizens have been watched by the FBI in a vain and illegal attempt to limit the outpouring of dissent which this war has engendered. It cannot be considered traitorous to oppose this illegal war which has destroyed the people and land of Southeast Asia and torn our nation asunder. We must exert all our efforts to end this war.

Along with twelve other Members of the House of Representatives, I have filed a suit challenging the constitutionality of the President's waging this war without the consent of the Congress. The declaration of war clause of the United States Constitution (Article I, Section VIII, clause 11) is clear proof of the founding fathers' intention that the executive alone should not be able to take this nation into war. Only the Congress has the power to declare war. The exigencies imposed upon the conduct of foreign affairs and war-making with the advent of the atomic bomb in no way permit the President to perpetuate the extended involvement of American men and money which we have squandered in Vietnam. Nor can the executive claim that Congressional votes to continue appropriations for the soldiers who are in the battlefield and to extend the draft which sends them there are in any way equivalent to a congressional declaration of war.

Our case was dismissed last week by Judge William Jones of the United States District Court, Washington, D.C., without our lawyers' presenting any oral arguments on our behalf, but we have already appealed the District Court decision to the Appellate Court. In its motion to dismiss, the Government contended that the President's powers as chief executive are sufficient to uphold his taking us into this war in the manner in which it has been done. The Justice Department has also argued that as congressmen we lack the standing to bring such a suit against the government. The doctrines of separation of powers and checks and balances will be mere charades if there is not a full airing of the issues we have raised in this case.

Our legal protest of the manner in which this war is being conducted is but one of many outcries against this slaughter. Despite this growing clamor for a change in our policy, President Nixon has widened the war into Laos and Cambodia, claiming victory and continued success for his Vietnamization program when the evidence clearly indicated otherwise. The much heralded Vietnamization of the war will mean that yellow-skinned people will do the dying in-

KEY VIETNAM TEXTS THE KENNEDY YEARS

Following are texts of key documents accompanying the Pentagon's study of the Vietnam war, dealing with the Administration of President John F. Kennedy up to the events that brought the overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963. Except where excerpting is specified, the documents are printed verbatim, with only unmistakable typographical errors corrected.

U.S. Ambassador's '60 Analysis Of Threats to Saigon Regime

Cablegram from Elbridge Durbrow, United States Ambassador in Saigon, to Secretary of State Christian A. Herter, Sept. 16, 1960.

As indicated our 495 and 538 Diem regime confronted by two separate but related dangers. Danger from demonstrations or coup attempt in Saigon could occur earlier; likely to be predominantly non-Communist in origin but Communists can be expected to endeavor infiltrate and exploit any such attempt. Even more serious danger is gradual Viet Cong extension of control over countryside which, if current Communist progress continues, would mean loss free Viet-nam to Communists. These two dangers are related because Communist successes in rural areas embolden them to extend their activities to Saigon and because non-Communist temptation to engage in demonstrations or coup is partly motivated by sincere desire prevent Communist take-over in Viet-nam.

Essentially [word illegible] sets of measures required to meet these two dangers. For Saigon danger essentially political and psychological measures required. For countryside danger security measures as well as political, psychological and economic measures needed. However both sets measures should be carried out simultaneously and to some extent individual steps will be aimed at both dangers.

Security recommendations have been made in our 539 and other messages, including formation internal security council, centralized intelligence, etc. This message therefore deals with our political and economic recommendations. I realize some measures I am recommending are drastic and would be most [word illegible] for an ambassador to make under normal circumstances. But conditions here are by no means

normal. Diem government is in quite serious danger. Therefore, in my opinion prompt and even drastic action is called for. I am well aware that Diem has in past demonstrated astute judgment and has survived other serious crises. Possibly his judgment will prove superior to ours this time, but I believe nevertheless we have no alternative but to give him our best judgment of what we believe is required to preserve his government. While Diem obviously resented my frank talks earlier this year and will probably resent even more suggestions outlined below, he has apparently acted on some of our earlier suggestions and might act on at least some of the following:

1. I would propose have frank and friendly talk with Diem and explain our serious concern about present situation and his political position. I would tell him that, while matters I am raising deal primarily with internal affairs, I would like to talk to him frankly and try to be as helpful as I can be giving him the considered judgment of myself and some of his friends in Washington on appropriate measures to assist him in present serious situation. (Believe it best not indicate talking under instructions.) I would particularly stress desirability of actions to broaden and increase his [word illegible] support prior to 1961 presidential elections required by constitution before end April. I would propose following actions to President:

2. Psychological shock effect is required to take initiative from Communist propagandists as well as non-Communist oppositionists and convince population government taking effective measures to deal with present situation, of hand. To achieve that effect following suggested:

4. Permit National Assembly wider legislative initiative and area of genuine debate and bestow on it authority to conduct, with appropriate publicity, public investigations of any department of government with right to question any official except President himself. This step is necessary for the purpose: (A) find some mechanism for dis-

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U.S. Supported Coup Against Diem



NGO DINH DIEM

... U.S. backed ouster

By Don Oberdorfer

Washington Post Staff Writer

At 4:30 p.m. on November 1, 1963, a few hours before he was murdered, President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam telephoned U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to determine the attitude of the American government toward the coup in progress outside his palace window.

Lodge was noncommittal. He had heard the gunfire, he said, but he did not have all the facts. "Also it is 4:30 a.m. in Washington and the U.S. government cannot possibly have a view."

"But you must have some general ideas," protested Diem. "After all, I am a Chief of State. I have tried to do my duty. I am trying to do now what duty and good sense require. I believe in duty above all."

Lodge replied that Diem had certainly done his duty, and with courage, and no one could take away from him the credit for his contributions to his country. "Now I am worried about your physical safety," the Ambassador continued. Had Diem heard that he had been offered safe conduct if he resigned?

"No," answered the beleaguered but stubborn Vietnamese President.

"If I can do anything for your physical safety, please call me," Lodge said.

"I am trying to re-establish order," concluded Diem, in the last words he would say to an American. Before the evening was out, he and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu had fled the Presidential Palace through a secret tunnel. The next afternoon they were captured by the insurgents in Cholon, the Chinese section of the city, and shot to death in an armored personnel carrier rumbling through the Saigon streets.

The refusal to intervene to save the tottering Diem was not a spur of the moment decision by Henry Cabot Lodge. According to a Pentagon study of United States involvement in the war, it was part of a thoroughly planned policy of the United States government, which had decided to back a coup if it appeared likely to succeed.

"Beginning in August of 1963 (two months before Diem's overthrow) we variously authorized, sanctioned and encouraged the coup efforts of the Vietnamese generals and offered full support for a successor government," the Pentagon report stated. "In October we cut off aid to Diem in a direct rebuff, giving a green light to the generals. We maintained clandestine contact with them throughout the planning and execution of the coup and sought to review their operational plans and proposed new government," the report added.

This policy, which sanctioned Diem's overthrow but not his murder, was approved at the White House. Even the substance of Lodge's statements in the final conversation with Diem—quoted in the Pentagon study—followed the guidelines of a directive dispatched to Saigon in the last days of October by McGeorge Bundy, President John F. Kennedy's assistant for national security affairs.

In that 11th hour order, high level documents but not all such documents—that U.S. authorities in Vietnam should not directly intervene on either side in a coup against Diem. "But, once a coup under responsible leadership has begun, and within these restrictions, it is in the interest of the U.S. Government that it should succeed," the directive said.

The decision to topple Ngo Dinh Diem was one of the most important turning points in the United States struggle in Indochina—as the Pentagon study puts it, "one of the times in the history of our Vietnam involvement when we were making fundamental choices."

The study says that the basic choices were these: (1) to continue to "plod along" with an increasingly unpopular Diem, (2) to encourage or tacitly support a military coup, taking the risk that the government might crumble or accommodate with the Viet Cong and (3) to grasp the opportunity of the political instability to disengage from South Vietnam.

According to the study, the first choice was rejected because of the belief that "we could not win" with Diem and his brother Nhu. The third course, withdrawal from Vietnam, was "never seriously considered" because of the assumption that an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam was "too important a strategic interest to abandon."

"The second course was chosen mainly for the reasons the first was rejected—Vietnam was thought too important; we wanted to win; and the rebellious generals seemed to offer that prospect," the Pentagon study said.

As a consequence of the choice that was made, the United States significantly deepened its commitment to South Vietnam. By deciding to bring Diem down, the U.S. assumed a great moral responsibility to his successors and the people of the country over whom they tried to rule. There is little indication in the Pentagon report—whose anonymous

makers realized this fateful consequence of their action. The heightened U.S. responsibility and involvement in Vietnam during the final days of the Kennedy Administration led to the commitment of American ground troops during the Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson—but ironically, Johnson was among those within the government who raised his voice against the plan to bring down Diem.

According to the Pentagon history, the then-Vice President told a high level meeting at the State Department on August 31, 1963, that he had great reservations about a coup because he had never seen "a genuine alternative" to Diem. "From both a practical and political viewpoint it would be a disaster to pull out," Johnson was quoted as saying. Instead of a coup, the United States should go back to "talking straight" to Diem's government and "once again go about winning the war," he reportedly added.

The basic picture of the United States involvement in the coup against Diem was reported in the press at the time and additional details have trickled out in the seven years since. The Pentagon study, including a chronology of events and decisions and documentation of the major steps, provides many details previously unknown. And the study shows that the U.S. role was even more direct, more calculated and more extensive than was generally believed at the time.

Beginning late in August, 1963, more than two months before the overthrow of Diem, a Central Intelligence Agency official in Saigon was in direct contact with the plotters in the Vietnam.

Continued